

THE SAFEGUARD OF THE ROCK-HEWN CHURCHES OF THE GÖREME VALLEY

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THE HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL HERITAGE OF GÖREME

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ABSTRACT

The rock-hewn churches of Cappadocia are a unique record of the Early Middle Ages and the Byzantine tenth century, when Asia Minor was the Empire. There is no comparable group of churches from this time. In addition, Cappadocia has some highly significant Byzantine artefacts without equivalent elsewhere. Christian activities were a direct continuation of the pagan, with only two breaks known: during the Muslim invasions (eighth century and beginning of the ninth), and during the state of war (twelfth century) before the Seljuk renaissance. Archaeology and written material illuminate the region's history, showing that for scientific, artistic and ethical reasons we have an obligation to try to save all the Avanos-Çavushin-Maçan-Göreme area. However, damage has been occurring at such a rate that it could be asked whether or not it is almost too late.

The administrative area now known as Göreme includes two historical sites: Matiane (Maçan, Avcılar), a small town known since antiquity; and Korama (Göreme), a neighbouring valley initially inhabited and later the site of monastic establishments from the ninth-tenth to the eleventh centuries.

The two names appear in the *Passio Prior* of St Hiero, which probably dates from AD 515. Hiero lived in Matiane; he was a wine-grower who enlisted in the Roman army, and was martyred in Melitene, but his severed hand was sent to his mother and probably deposited as a relic in the Basilica of Çavushin.

However, the Christian establishments were successors to the pagan. Indeed, the Christian history of these sites is linked in ancient literature to the neighbouring town of Venasa (Avanos). From Strabo [*Geography*, 12, chapter 2, § 5], we know that the holy city was dedicated to the heavenly Zeus (*Zeus Ouraneos*). The high-priest of Venasa was the third most important person in the Kingdom of Cappadocia (after the king and the high priest of Comana). By the end of the fourth century the Christian

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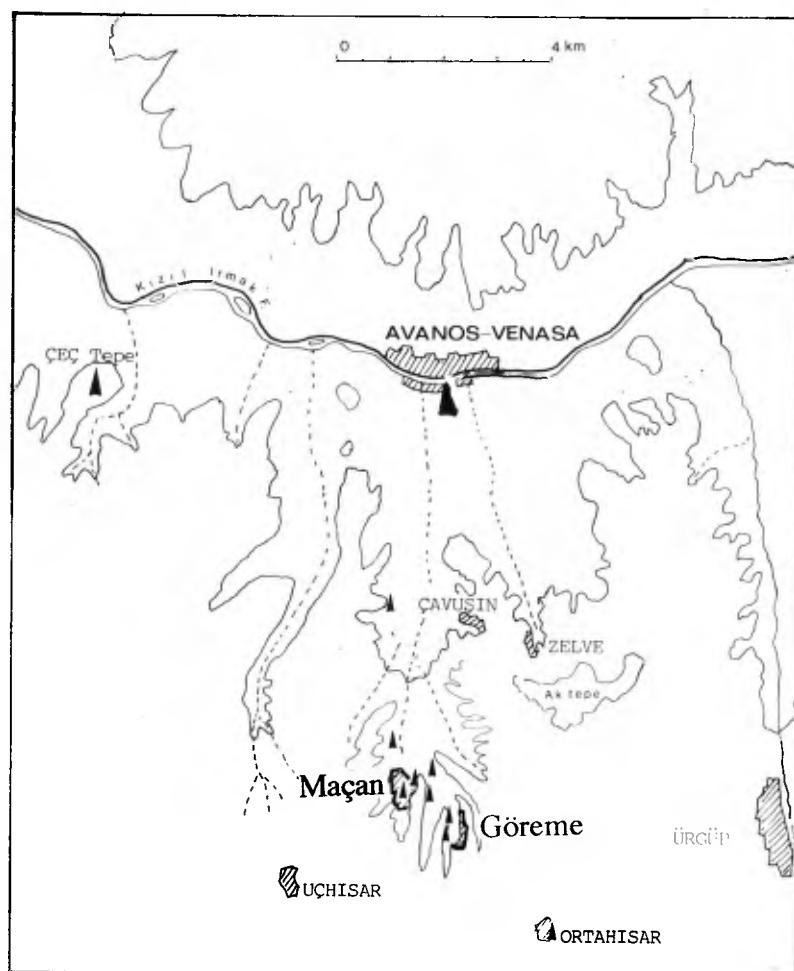


Figure 1. Map of the area of Avanos-Maçan (Avcılar) – Göreme. (The black triangles indicate ancient sites.)

city was flourishing, with numerous clergy and a martyrium being built (see the twentieth letter of Gregory of Nyssa, and letters 246-248 of Gregory of Nazianzos). Recently, a palaeo-Christian necropolis was discovered. It is likely that the religious character of the region in the Christian era has its origins in pagan pilgrimages [Thierry, 1981; Anon., 1987].

In the green valleys of Maçan, many rock-cut tomb chambers recall Greek and Roman times. Some even retain their vestibular columns. The most beautiful were no doubt those of the high priests of Venasa. The necropolis of Maçan extended throughout Göreme valley [Thierry, 1987:108-113, 128-136; 1984a; Anon., 1982].

Venasa was destroyed and the region devastated by the Persian invasions.

The first Christian settlements were dispersed, with villagers and monks alike grouping around the springs. In Maçan, across from three ancient tombs in Karshi

Bacak, one can see two important proto-Byzantine basilicas (one is Durmush Kilisesi, with an exceptional central ambo; the other, anonymous, is partially filled with sand and in danger of disintegration) [Thierry, 1984a], with a third, a funerary church of the seventh-eighth century, with paintings and inscriptions [Thierry, 1984b: 318-320]. Another ancient church was destroyed during the construction of a hotel below the three tombs. Göreme was then both countryside and a cemetery for Maçan. Early on, Christian monasteries gradually spread up from Venasa into the dales of Zelve, on the other side of the Kızıl Irmak.

Around the Basilica of Çavuşin, which became a church of pilgrimage [Thierry, 1983: 59-109], many small hermitages were established, dotting the ravines of Aktepe. Here there are numerous chapels from the Early Middle Ages, of which two are particularly important: the Church of Joachim and Anna (which has the oldest Byzantine cycle of the childhood of Mary); and the Church of Niketas the Stylite, which is one of only five churches decorated in Eastern-Greek style and donated by a kleisourarch posted to the eastern Byzantine frontier [Thierry, 1993: 203-237, 255-281].

The frequent Muslim invasions – extending over nearly a century, from the eighth to the beginning of the ninth century – devastated the region. Following the Byzantine victories at the end of the ninth century and at the beginning of the tenth, the province once again became peaceful and prosperous. The second half of the ninth century saw also the end of the Iconoclasm period (727-843), although it seems that in Cappadocia, Iconoclasts and Iconodules had lived side by side. However, after 843 the churches were decorated with figurative paintings.

The re-population of the area was patchy: almost nil at Zelve, while Göreme began to develop as a religious centre, due to the revival of Maçan (which became a bishopric at the beginning of the eleventh century). At Göreme the Christian cemetery re-occupied the ancient necropolis.

From the end of the ninth century to the beginning of the tenth, small monasteries grew in number. In the valleys of Aktepe, ancient churches were renovated: the apse of Güllü dere N° 3 was painted; the two chapels of N° 4 were repainted (beautiful paintings from the workshop of the Old Tokalı and dated 913-920); and the pigeon house of Kızıl Çukur, Haçlıkilise, excavated in the Iconoclastic period, was beautifully painted in the early tenth century [Thierry, 1983: 117-181; 1993: 245-254].

The monastic settlements in Göreme were spreading up the valley from the end of the ninth to the end of the eleventh centuries. Numerous little churches can be seen in the low valley [Jerphanion, 1925: 95-294], likewise a unique painted tomb [Thierry, 1984a: 666-678]. The region was under the authority of the bishoprics of Matiane (Maçan) and Hagios Prokopios (Ürgüp).

Göreme's heyday dates from the time of the Phokas, the most powerful aristocratic family of Cappadocia, whose fortunes lasted from the middle of the ninth to the beginning of the eleventh centuries. Their capital was Kaisareia (Kayseri) [Kaplan, 1981]. The founders of the New Church of Tokalı [Jerphanion, 1942: 297-376] have recently been identified as Nikephoros Phokas (before he became emperor in 963); an unknown nephew, Leon; and his brother Constantine, who died in captivity after 953.

Thus the paintings can be dated to about 950 [Thierry, 1989a:217-233]. This explains the beautiful pictures, the high-quality iconographical programmes and the costly materials used, such as lapis-lazuli and gold.

The New Tokalı is an excellent example of Byzantine Macedonian renaissance artistic achievement. It provides evidence of the power and richness of the Anatolian aristocracy. Likewise, we know that the Phokas treated as an equal the Georgian king David Curopalate, ruler of the Tao (east of Erzurum). And we have only the royal Georgian creations to compare with the New Tokalı murals, primarily the paintings in the cupola of Ishan, from about two or three decades later [Thierry, 1977b: Ch.5; 1989a: 230-231]. Hence we can hypothesize that aristocratic families of Asia Minor were able to support great workshops of painters.

The Phokas' patronage in Göreme explains the foundation in neighbouring Çavushin of a church dedicated to the commemoration of the victories of Nikephoros Phokas, his brother Leon, his father Bardas, and two chiefs of the Army of Asia [Jerphanion, 1942: 511-550; Rodley, 1983; Thierry, 1983: 43-57]. Here one can see the only known example extant of a Byzantine imperial triumph (albeit in modest shape, since the paintings are rather mediocre and the donors feudal lords of modest means). We see the Empress Theophano, the Prince Basil and the three Phokas looking at two horsemen marching from the left as if on parade (John Tzimiskes, later emperor, 969-976, and Melias). We can therefore speak of the "Church of Nikephoros Phokas," rather than the "Pigeon House Church of Çavushin."

In the eleventh century – an era of general prosperity – the monasteries multiplied and grew larger. Most new churches were painted, although the quality of the art was uneven – some of the paintings being provincial, others comparable to those of the best Byzantine workshops.

As for the three famous columned churches (Çarıklı Kilise, Elmalı Kilise and Karanlık Kilise) situated at the end of the Göreme valley, it is now generally agreed that Jerphanion's dates are correct, i.e., around the middle of the eleventh century [Jerphanion, 1942: 377-473; Rodley, 1985: 95-103; Thierry, 1983: 43-57]. Their paintings are good examples of aristocratic Byzantine works, and the portraits of the donors tell us their social ranks: a priest, landlords of the local aristocracy, etc. In the narthex of Karanlık Kilise one notes the most important of them: John entalmatikos, the title being probably that of an emissary of the Patriarch of Constantinople. He is dressed as a high dignitary of the court of Emperor Nikephoros Botaniates and illustrates the importance of the Cappadocian monasteries at that time.

Some provincial churches are interesting owing to their iconographical programmes such as Saklı Kilise, the Church of Meryemana and the Yusuf Koç Kilisesi in Maçan [Restle, 1967: 279-310, Figures 21-44; Thierry, 1977b: Ch. 9]; the first two because of their Christological cycles and the third because of its many images of saints. In all, we find donors' portraits of varied kinds. Likewise in some modest Göreme chapels, where the icons with ancient graffiti give evidence of the people's devotion.

It would appear that the religious life of the region was waning by the end of the eleventh century, as no foundation has been found from the thirteenth century, which

was the era of renaissance of the now Seljuk Asia Minor. The rural and monastic centre of Maçan-Göreme-Çavushin no doubt suffered from the decline of the bishopric of Hagios Prokopios. In contrast, elsewhere new centres were growing up, such as Damsa, Soganlı and Erdemli.

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The monuments of Göreme-Maçan-Çavushin are very important to the understanding of the Christianization of a pagan holy city's region, the people's changes during the Middle Ages, rural and monastic cohabitation, and the evolution of image worship before and after Iconoclasm. In the tenth century churches, as in the earlier, one can see numerous early Byzantine images (cycle of Mary's childhood, prophetic visions, Virgin of Tenderness, Dormition of Mary, Evangelists and Last Judgement, Eustathios' vision, and so on).

Moreover, the history of the Byzantine Empire is brilliantly illustrated by the Phokas' patronage in Göreme and, in Çavushin, the commemoration of their victories against the Arabs (964 and 965).

Consequently we must save this historical and archaeological heritage, not only the Göreme circle but also the churches all around in the area of Maçan-Çavushin towards Avanos.

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However, sites and monuments are in danger of disintegration, with human causes patently reinforcing the natural causes. Thus the last column and the porch of the Çavushin Basilica have already fallen down; the vault of the Nikephoros Phokas church has a transverse crack which widens every year; the church of Meryemana is breaking apart, as is the high gallery of the big proto-Byzantine monastery of Özkonak; and so on – an inventory needs to be taken.

Painting damage has increased over the last ten years. In the guarded but heavily visited churches the paintings are attacked by the water vapour and carbon dioxide breathed out by the crowds of visitors (up to 5 000 daily), and direct abrasion occurs where no chain barriers exist (or are ignored).

In the isolated and unguarded churches, damage results from numerous causes. One can see visitors' graffiti, particularly in Ihlara valley, and near Göreme in the very old Church of Niketas (dating from 991). But far worse have been the intentional destructions, particularly in the area of Çavushin-Maçan-Göreme, i.e., within the "Historical Park." Several times the very old paintings of the Çavushin Basilica have been scratched off: first in 1983-84, then in 1989-90, and finally the remaining paintings have been washed over with green. In the neighbouring valley of Zindanönü, faces were scratched off in 1987 or 1988. In Kılıçlar Kilise, faces and names were

destroyed which had survived intact to 1988, namely James and Philip above the door. In Saklı Kilise, the Crucifixion has been smeared with black.

Vandalism has also been noted in Babayan and Shahinefendi churches, and the very interesting paintings of Mazıköy were completely destroyed three years after their discovery in 1986 [Jolivet-Levy, 1991: 177-178] – and not all sites have been checked!

It seems that this kind of damage is connected with a re-awakening to radical Islam in the countryside.

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As for environment, the inventory shows a disaster. Reading the “Master Plan for the Historical National Park,” formulated more than 20 years ago [Anon., 1971], we are obliged to conclude that nothing was done for the safeguard of the erstwhile marvellous village of Maçan-Avcılar. Campsites, restaurants, guesthouses and advertising hoardings intrude everywhere, and are proliferating along the roads. There has been an anarchic multiplication of hotels located in the landscape at the expense of gardens and cones. For instance, in Maçan, in the old ruined centre, there are now new, poorly-built, boarding houses; in front of Karshi Bacak, there is a new hotel, well built but too wide and high; and in El Nazar valley a very large settlement has been established. The worst is above Ortahisar – an enormous, eight-storeyed building; in comparison, the *kale* of the village has been made ridiculous.

All these settlements unbalance a precarious village organization, with particular pressure on water supplies.

Damage can be increasingly seen in the countryside. Road widening and opening, digging for car-parks and viewing points are more and more numerous. Opening of footpaths across fields and orchards adds to the destruction of the environment. Numerous conflicts exist between peasants, villagers and tourism workers. It does not help that some tourists are not strictly correct: in short, mass tourism is not appropriate to Cappadocian sites.

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What kind of defence should be adopted? Major decisions need to be made by the Turkish authorities, in close consultation with the relevant international organizations, on both technical and territorial matters. At the same time, one can do nothing without the cooperation of the local population. Civil and religious authorities, villagers, tourism workers and the business community will have to work together towards a consensus for a sustainable development of the area that respects everybody's interests in so far as that is possible and compatible with preservation of the unique cultural heritage that is the Göreme area.

Nevertheless, to find effective methods of curbing the increasing deterioration is a very complex problem.

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